

MEDICAL MISSION NEWS

Summer 2010



Gestures of solidarity

Columbian Medical Mission Sister Maria Fernanda Ramirez Rivera, part of MMS in Peru, joined a group of volunteers brought together by a Puerto Rican organization to respond to the disaster caused by the earthquake in Haiti.

I want to begin by telling you what a simple woman told me in Pachacutec (where I am in mission) when we were talking a few days after the earthquake about what had happened in Haiti. "Look, Sister, when I see in the news how the people in Haiti lived, even before the earthquake, I think it is as if one of our neighbors had died of hunger...and when the people find out what happened, they ask, 'Where were the neighbors that allowed such a thing to happen?' Well, you and I and all the people are those neighbors."



All that was left

I remembered those words time and again as I walked through the streets of Port-au-Prince for the first time. There was rubble and twisted iron wherever I looked; remains of furniture mixed with pieces of clothing, paper, utensils, photos and parts of a toy car hanging from what little was left of a four-story building. Where now dozens of people are buried, an old man was sitting and staring at the ruins of what was once a school. Among the dead there must have surely been one who was very dear to him. Two men were bathing naked in the street, taking advantage of the little water they were able to find. Little boys and girls, as soon as they saw our cars, ran up to ask for water and food. Despite the fact that we could not give them anything at that moment, they waved good-bye and smiled.

Large caravans of cars from different international organizations passed by and the Blue Berets (UN troops) tried to control a long line of people waiting for hours to get a packet of food for their families. As we passed, a woman smiled at us carrying on her head, with incredible balance, a large bowl of something she wanted to sell. One group of women washed their clothes at a common water pipe which an NGO placed there for the people of the barrio. A group of little girls played near a wall that was about to collapse in what was supposed to be a camp but in reality was an overcrowded collection of people in small, improvised tents made of plastic, pieces of clothing, sheets and cardboard. We had landed in the midst of the crude reality of the Haitian people who were eaten up by the chronic diseases of social injustice and extreme poverty. Their situation was only aggravated by the earthquake that snatched away the lives of more than three hundred thousand persons.



A Sense of Home

What must it be like for a person to lose everything that we call “home”: loved ones, the house and all that it contained, one’s place of work, many friends? I remember some of the things which I saw and how they spoke to me of the many different ways in which each person lives with pain and loss. I remember how each person tried somehow or the other to recapture a sense of “home” by clinging to anything that could serve as a link to all that had been essential for them. A woman came up to me in the camp and asked me for a pail, a broom and a mop. I told her where they were kept and she explained, “Everyday I swept my house in the morning, washed the floor with water and dried it carefully. Now also I have to do that.” It didn’t matter to her that her “house” now measured only four square meters and contained the little that she had to keep her alive. Doing this represented for her the power to make it her “new home,” if only for a few months.

I saw a woman who was cleaning the sidewalk alongside of what remained of her house. The house next door was completely destroyed and the terrace rested only a few feet above the ground. There you could see some potted plants that had survived even after the collapse of the entire structure. The woman took a little of the water which she was using to clean and gave it to the plants on the neighboring “terrace.” This gesture told me of her need to connect herself in some way with caring for life, with nature which also had suffered as she did during this disaster.

A group of women who usually met to pray and sing on Saturday afternoons, decided to meet every afternoon under some trees simply to be together and to sing what they had sung before so many times. They did this every day at the same time, and I saw that this gave them something to look forward to in their daily lives.



There are organizations that do what is possible to bring help to those places most in need, but there is also bureaucracy and abuse which impede the rapid arrival of the donations to the people. We found ourselves in places in which, even after five days, there was hunger and thirst. It was painful to see the children in extreme states of malnutrition, and because they lacked necessary vaccinations they suffered from infections and preventable diseases. They could no longer be breast-fed because their mothers no longer produced milk; they had no food or medications and suffered from lack of good hygiene. The illiteracy in the population was also painful to note.

While we were visiting different communities in Port-au-Prince and outside of it during our five weeks of bringing medical attention and much love, I was able to find rays of light in the darkness of this tragedy. I could see the beautiful gestures of solidarity between the affected persons and the neighbor who pulled from the ruins a twenty-one-day-old baby who is now an orphan. Despite having three children of her own, this woman received the baby as a gift from God. There was a twelve-year-old boy who bravely assumed his condition as an orphan and the responsibility (at least for the time being) for his little brothers. I saw a grandmother who was left with nine orphaned grandchildren who had a smile on her face saying that she is very grateful to God that she was alive and that she had these children. Someone wrote on the wall of a half-ruined house, *In spite of everything, I believe in God*. A community that lost a great number of its boys and girls who were buried in the school both received us and sent us off singing and giving thanks to God. Many people, Haitian men and women, were willing to donate their time and their abilities to collaborate with organizations offering humanitarian aid to help their country.



The volunteers - committed to the struggle for a more just world

Haiti means “land of mountains.” It is a beautiful country with a difficult history. Conquest, colonization, slavery, dictatorships and natural disasters have left an indelible mark on its development. It is difficult to understand how, on our own continent, we can live so close to such extreme realities and continue to sleep in peace. It is difficult to accept that the Haitian children have to grow up in the midst of the daily struggle for a bare minimum for life.

The group with which I worked, *Community Initiative*, is a beautiful group inspired and coordinated by Dr. Jose Vargas-Vidot made up of people committed to life, to the love of humanity, to the struggle for a more just world—a world of solidarity and peace. Although I feel a profound sadness at having had to leave Haiti, this whole experience has left me with the great satisfaction of having been there and having contributed as a Medical Mission Sister. This experience has strengthened my commitment to try to help others know better the reality of our brothers and sisters in Haiti. I want to keep on supporting concrete projects of trustworthy organizations in Haiti. Most of all, I treasure the many people I came to know, with whom I could share the mission, to whom I could give my time, my gifts, my love, and share a hug, a prayer, a word.

Since my return to Peru, I have often felt the need to return to my experience in Haiti to recall the faces, the looks, the words that are etched in a special place in my heart. I want to discover, amidst the tears that well up in me when I relive the scenes of profound human suffering which I witnessed, all that I received from sharing life with the Haitian people and with the volunteers. Without a doubt, the mission in Haiti has been one of the most transforming experiences that I have ever had.



Coming Home

German Medical Mission Sister Gisela explains how she sees that a spiritual Home needs a concrete manifestation.

Having been part of chapter and the conversations around “coming home” I am becoming clearer about what home can mean in a globalized society in which mobility and flexibility are asked of everyone at any moment. During the workshops I facilitate and working with people one to one, I am in touch with folk from different walks of life. They share their stories with me, stories in which they search and long for a home, for a place where they are loved and accepted as they are. They feel questioned by their surroundings, their families, colleagues and even their friends. Insecurity and instability are a major part of their lives. So, I try to provide some “home” for them by being stable in my love and care for them. It seems that these people can experience freedom and acceptance while participating in the workshops and while sharing their personal stories in private conversations. This gives them the opportunity to look at themselves with new eyes and to walk step-by-step into “their home.”

Home is not so much a physical place for me, although it helps a lot to have a beautiful and stable place. Home is much more an inner place. The one where I am totally and freely able to be the person God sees in me. It is even my home when I am *not* acting the way God dreams for me to be. Home is the place where I can discover who I really am. To experience even only glimpses of this encourages me to continue becoming ever more myself—my self. That is home for me. This is the place I hope people around me can find when sharing workshops and stories and mission with me. This place does not so much depend on circumstances—having a job, money, a family. Although many of us have lived through different kinds of violence, there is still that home in us which never has been violated. That is the place I try to encourage people to find and to treasure once they have found it. God’s incarnation is the most profound example of coming home, a coming home to our human-divine nature. God allows us to share the fullness of life in Jesus who was at home in himself and in God.

For me a spiritual home needs a concrete manifestation. In my family we had a big garden where we grew most of our fruit and vegetables. That was hard work and a great gift. I learned to treasure the Earth, water, rain, sun, spring with its new life and sowing time. I treasured summer with caring for the crops, weeding and watering, and harvesting all the fruits and vegetables day after day, week after week, till the end of autumn when the first frost would come. Without being aware I learned to think in cycles, to respect the process of sowing, growing, harvesting, and dying.



Here in Peru I am confronted with desert and with the destruction caused by human exploitation. We are in the midst of conflicts about mines, trying to discover how mining can be done in an Earth-friendly way. When concerned only about profit, mining processes pollute the soil and the water, destroying local people's livelihood. In the city of Lima young people with whom I am working hardly have any contact with earth, plants or animals. They only know the sand and dust of the streets. There are parks and green spaces in Lima but it is not the same as living with nature and its treasures. The only seasons here are summer and winter. Only when you look very closely can you recognize some springtime when plants start to blossom more than in wintertime. The people here have not had the same contact and relationship with Earth as I have been blessed with. This seems to have affected how they live and relate to themselves and Earth as home. Their identity is fragile. They long to "come home." Meanwhile, society offers them artificial identities and electronic relationships, homes in social networks, in certain life styles, clothing, groups and so on.

The fragile identity of the young in Lima, is confirmed for me when I visit other parts of Peru where young people grow up in closer contact with nature, in the smaller towns or villages. There they develop a much stronger identity with the place which is their home, with the land, the earth that they cultivate and their village or town. Tomasa, MMS candidate, observed a similar thing when she started her classes in a technical institute in the city. Among the new students were several from other parts of Peru, from smaller towns and villages. Until now, people from more rural areas were looked upon as insecure and a bit ignorant but Tomasa says these students are spontaneous, open and participate actively even in a new class in totally new surroundings. Therefore, I believe that contact with the Earth as our home helps us to be more ourselves and to be at home within ourselves. This, then, makes it easier to adapt to the different places, cultures and challenges we encounter in life.



Finding myself at home

Indian Medical Mission Sister Sabitha writes about how she found herself at home in a very different part of India:

Home is a dwelling place. When God dwells within me, I prepare a home for God, and when I dwell in God, God prepares a home for me. When I experience the communion with nature and the whole family of the human and animal kingdom, there I make my “home.”

I would like to share a story with you about my own experience of being “at home.” This is my fifth year in Khandwa, Madhya Pradesh, India. When I look back to my first years of life in Khandwa, I know that I felt like a fish out of water—everywhere there were strange faces, and strange ways of relating. There seemed to be no smiles sent my way or even to other people. For me it is too much to live like a stranger anywhere, so as soon as I go to a new place, I visit people and their families, talk to them and try to slowly start building a relationship with them.

Khandwa was a new mission at that time and people didn’t have much faith in us, so I began by visiting people. I told the women I would help them to form a self-help group. After a few visits they cooperated with me, but there was a lot of doubt and apprehension regarding the small savings scheme which is part of this program. The women began collecting money, but after two months they took the money back and discontinued the group. I was a bit disappointed. As time went on things began to change. The people became friendlier and many self-help groups were formed to develop leadership, income generation and education of women. Young girls also started coming to spend some time with us or to learn something from us. I believe that it is opening ourselves to people and establishing relationships that makes a place a “home.” So it is also with the Earth. The Earth becomes home when we love and relate with her in a humane way.



Indian MMS Babita, another member of the community in Khandwa at a health camp.

even where everything is strange

Recently when I was returning after my holidays, my train reached Khandwa after 10:30 p.m. I told my sisters not to come to the station to meet me, I would come by myself. After being in Khandwa for five years, this was the first time I had the courage to say this. As soon as I got off the train, I looked around to see if anybody had come to meet me. After I made sure that nobody was there, I took an auto rickshaw. The driver was a man who knew our place so I was quite relaxed. As I was on my way, I looked at the passing scenes and told myself, "This is my place, these are my people, they know me and I know them, I don't need to panic." I had come home! In Khandwa I don't claim that everyone is good and everywhere it is safe, but I was never able to take such a daring step in the place where I grew up. The people there don't know me. I left the homeland of my youth in South India twenty-five years ago and I have been in North India ever since. As I reached my Khandwa home, my sisters were waiting to welcome me back.

For some, home may be within four walls, for some, a community of people and for some, this entire universe.



Celine - our new MMS at the UN

Working at the United Nations, Medical Mission Sisters are promoting issues of justice where people are being kept in poverty making their health particularly at risk. They have less chance of that life to the full that Jesus came to bring.

In her U.N. ministry, Indian MMS Philo collaborated with a number of Christian NGOs and served as Co-Chair of the Earth Values Caucus, an NGO focused on sustainable development and bringing ecological values onto the U.N. agenda. "I believe we are the voice of the voiceless in an arena where policies are made which affect every living being on our planet," she explains. "The work at the U.N. has been very challenging for me, and I am very grateful to the Medical Mission Sisters for entrusting this important aspect of our mission to me. I never worked so hard before or travelled so much. I loved every moment of it."

We thank Philo for her many contributions at the U.N., and we welcome her successor, Celine Paramundayil, also from India, who is beginning a three-year term at the U.N. A nurse-midwife and educator, Celine has worked with the dalit women (those in the lowest social strata) in Gandhipet in Tamil Nadu.. Celine says "In my ten years in Gandhipet I organised around 2,000 women through 120 women's groups in 35 villages and 25 children's groups till we handed over the leadership to the local women. I learned the value of human dignity and the need to respect each human being, irrespective of their caste or what they possess. Even today, if someone insults the dalit, I feel the pain." Celine has indeed an excellent background for work at the UN.



Celine and a Carmelite sister colleague at the United Nations.

and what are we doing here in the UK?

Ecological Crisis (from MMS General Chapter Report, 2009)

More than ever, we are experiencing the impact of the devastation of our planet. Earth's resources are exploited uncontrollably by a few, resulting in extinction of some species, widening gap between the rich and the poor and, economic and political crisis. Climate change and the increasing frequency of calamities have an untold cost to human lives and other species, increasing displacement of peoples and both internal and international forced migration. The victims of this crisis are the poor and the marginalized, especially women and children. The rhythm of the universe has been disrupted by greed, violence and wars. The impact of the phenomenon of globalization on the poor (including the Earth) is bringing about impoverishment, sickness, and death. Consumerism, individualism, and fundamentalism are eroding the fabric of all societies.

Here in the UK we have been realising the importance of action to stop climate change for some years now. We also realise that it is vital that we network with others with similar concerns. Medical Mission Sisters have been part of different campaigns to convince the government of the importance of committing the UK to reduce carbon emissions drastically. Nothing less will prevent the looming disasters to our planet that will affect those living in poverty the most, the people with whom many of us live and work. We invite you to join us together with CAFOD, Christian Aid, Operation Noah, the World Development Movement and many others in calling on our politicians to work by all means at their disposal to protect the environment.

“The Wave” was one campaign in which MMS joined thousands of climate change protesters from England and Wales last year calling for an effective deal from the United Nations conference in Copenhagen.



3 MMS with some of their parish Justice & Peace group at the WAVE

OBITUARY

Please pray for Sister Agnes Zuzek, sister of Sr Terezija Zuzek and a member of the MMS Community in London, who died recently.

STAMPS

Our grateful thanks to everyone who sends used stamps to John Dixon, who sells them on our behalf. In 2009 nearly £1700 was raised for our missions in this way. Please continue to send stamps to: John Dixon, 97 Reading Road, South Shields, Tyne & Wear NE33 4SF.

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